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ABSTRACT

Literacy is a social concept more reflective of culture and context than of formal instruction and can be used for cultural transmission within a society or for cultural imperialism when imposed from outside. The Algonquian-speaking Micmac Indians used pictographs, petroglyphs, notched sticks, and wampum as written communication to serve early social, political, cultural, and spiritual needs. Roman Catholic missionaries adapted the aboriginal symbols and developed hieroglyphs to teach prayers. These modified hieroglyphs remain the essence of Micmac literacy although four Roman scripts were developed by European missionaries and the Canadian government to promote cultural assimilation. Micmac language research to develop culturally responsive educational materials during the 1970's led to debate about choice of writing script and the subsequent development of a new script and extensive modifications of traditional scripts. Although the value of literacy has been recognized by the Micmac Tribe for over 300 years, the varieties of scripts imposed by outside cultures has impeded production of bicultural educational materials. (LFL)

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MICMAC LITERACY AND COGNITIVE ASSIMILATION

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Micmac Literacy and Cognitive Assimilation

Introduction

Literacy is an integral process of cognitive assimilation and cultural imperialism. When the processes of becoming literate are applied to the youth of their own culture, literacy is called cultural transmission. But when a certain literacy is forced upon youths outside that culture, literacy becomes cultural assimilation and cultural imperialism. The functions of literacy, as a shield in cultural transmission and as a sword of cultural assimilation, have been hidden by the interactions of literacy's myths and modern conceptions of literacy.

Literacy myths have disguised the functions and value of literacy in society (Graff, 1979). Viewed as the benign liberator of the mind, literacy has been become the modernizing agent of society, an economic commodity necessary for national development (Oxenham, 1981). Thus, guided by mistaken assumptions about the desirability and economic effects of literacy, tribal states and underdeveloped nations have instituted policies which have imposed modern values on tribal, preindustrial societies without regard for their language and culture in the hopes of their being able to overcome their social, economic, and political impotence as well as racism.

Modern conceptions of literacy have further disguised the processes of literacy because they are fragmented and limited:

fragmented by the search among western scholars for normative standards which can be universally applied; limited by the bias toward instrumental objectives of modern liberal social theory and western school practices. Literacy is, however, not an all or none proposition (Dauzat and Dauzat, 1977) nor can its elements be universally applied (Heath, 1981). Rather literacy is a relative social concept more reflective of culture and context than of the levels of formal instruction by which it is usually measured.

Little is known about the role and functions of literacy within various cultural contexts and how these different contexts affect attitudes and values toward literacy, despite the search of univeral normative standards. Still less is known of children's pre-school literacy experiences in their homes and communities. Recent studies of literacy have shown, however, that literacy has not been used in the same way in all cultures, nor have its results been the same (Cole and Scribner, 1978; Clammer, 1976). Yet modern studies have not inquired about how literacy functions outside of western institutions of learning and, more importantly, what factors govern literacy acceptance, rejection, and diffusion. In the last two decades the consistent failure of the schools to promote societal literacy (Copperman, 1978) suggests that much more is involved than the formal processes taught in schools.

Recent historical comparative studies of literacy (Spolsky, Englebrecht, and Ortiz, 1982; Walker, 1969, 1981) and ethnographic studies in different communities (Heath, 1983;

Scribner and Cole, 1981) reveal that the acquisition and diffusion of literacy are related to a society's perception of literacy's value and function. Thus any attempt to define literacy must include a specification of context (Graff, 1975) and an examination of that society's experiences with literacy.

The hidden bias of the myths and concepts of literary became apparent to this writer in 1975 when my people, the Micmac communities of eastern Canada, had to choose an orthography for use in reserve schools. A new practical and efficient writing system, purported to reflect best the phonemic system of the Micmac language, was introduced but was met with initial resistance. Reasons for community resistance to the new script lay in the socio-cultural factors associated with earlier scripts. This paper seeks to describe the historical continuity and development of literacy among the Micmac Indians and disclose how the processes of literacy can become cognitive assimilation rather than a benign liberator of the mind.

My people, the Micmac Indians, are an Algonkian-speaking tribe of northeastern America who for over three hundred years have had several different kinds of literacies which have served the social and cultural, and spiritual needs of tribal society. The traditional processes of Algonkian literacy remain the deep structure of the Micmac mind and provide the specification of context of all other kinds of literacies. Pictographs, petroglyphs, notched sticks and wampum were the primary native texts of Algonkian ideographic literacy for the Micmac. Europeans adapted aboriginal symbols and designs found on earlier native texts and developed hieroglyphic characters which were

used for teaching prayers. These modified Algonkian hieroglyphics remain the essense of Micmac literacy, even though four roman scripts have also been developed to served different purposes of European missionaries, Canadian governments, and native groups over the last 250 years.

Aboriginal Literacy

Through the use of pictographs, petroglyphs, notched sticks, and wampum, early North American Indians achieved a form of written communication and recording which served the social, political, cultural and spiritual needs of the early period. Only remnants of the aboriginal period of literacy remain for most have perished or were not recorded accurately by European travelers and missionaries in their written observations of the new world. In 1497 John Cabot's exploration uncovered "fallen trees bearing marks" (Maine Historical Society, 1897:347) which caught his attention. In 1652 Father Gabriel Druilletes reported the Algonkian Indians using coal for pen, bark for paper, and writing with new and peculiar characters. He wrote:

> They use certain marks, according to their ideas as a local memory to recollect the points, articles, and maxims which they heard (Ganong, 1910:22).

In 1653 Father Bressani reported Indians of New France using

> little sticks instead of books, which they sometimes mark with certain signs... By the aid of these they can repeat the names of a hundred or more presents, the decisions adopted in councils and a thousand other particulars (Ganong, 1910: 23).

Aboriginal literacy embodied tribal epistemology in native

texts which interacted with and depended upon the oral tradition. Ancient oral Indian tradition is and was dependent upon the oral skills of its tribal men and women of knowledge, skills highly prized in tribal society. Using ideographic symbolization of concepts and ideas, Algonkian Indians supplemented the oral tradition with ideological catalogues which helped to record and store valued knowledge, information and records on natural materials available to them, such as birchbark, rocks, and shells.

The various native texts in tribal North America represented the world view of tribal people, in particular, their ideas, beliefs, and thoughts about knowledge, power, and medicine. These native texts represented another way of knowing that has since been eradicated from western thought with rise of modern man. A fundamental element in tribal epistemology lay in two traditional knowledge sources.

1) the immediate world of personal and tribal experiences, that is one's perceptions, thoughts, and memory which included one's shared experiences with others;

2) the spiritual world evidenced through dreams, visions, and signs which were often interpreted with the aid of medicine men or elders.

Native texts thus catalogued essential knowledge of the two worlds in holistic meaningful ideographs which were transmitted to succeeding generations through the oral tradition and appropriate rituals. Religious traditions and rituals in effect provided access to the storehouse of knowledge, and provided harmony for all life, including plants and animals.

Native texts appear to have served both a public and private

function. Wampum was the public record, maintained by a wampum keeper or tribal historian. Regularly the wampum was brought forward at ceremonial gatherings to announce new events and recall past events of interest to all. Political records of treaties and presents, represented through conventional symbols were woven with shells into strings or belts. The arrangement of shells in relation to color could indicate an attitude, such as peace and friendship or war and death.

Pictographs, petroglyphs, and notched sticks served more diversified uses, although these appear to have been principally personal, aimed at practical and spiritual functions. Of the practical functions, Algonkian Indians used petroglyphs, pictographs, and notched sticks to communicate information and messages to friends and relatives of one's whereabouts or of routes and directions taken or to be taken, to relate stories of the hunt or battle about individuals or heroes of ancient times, to enlist warriors into battle, or to record historical events in time. Note illustration No. 1.1.

Of the spiritual functions, Algonkian Indians were known to have used pictographs and petroglyphs for communicating with spirit world or for conveying individual visions and experiences with the spirit world. In effect, the native texts represented a native theory of knowledge which is predicated on the existence of spirits, power, or medicine. Plants, animals, humans, and spirits of the universe communicated in the spirit world as one. Thus many Micmac petroglyphs illustrate the journeys of Micmacs to the

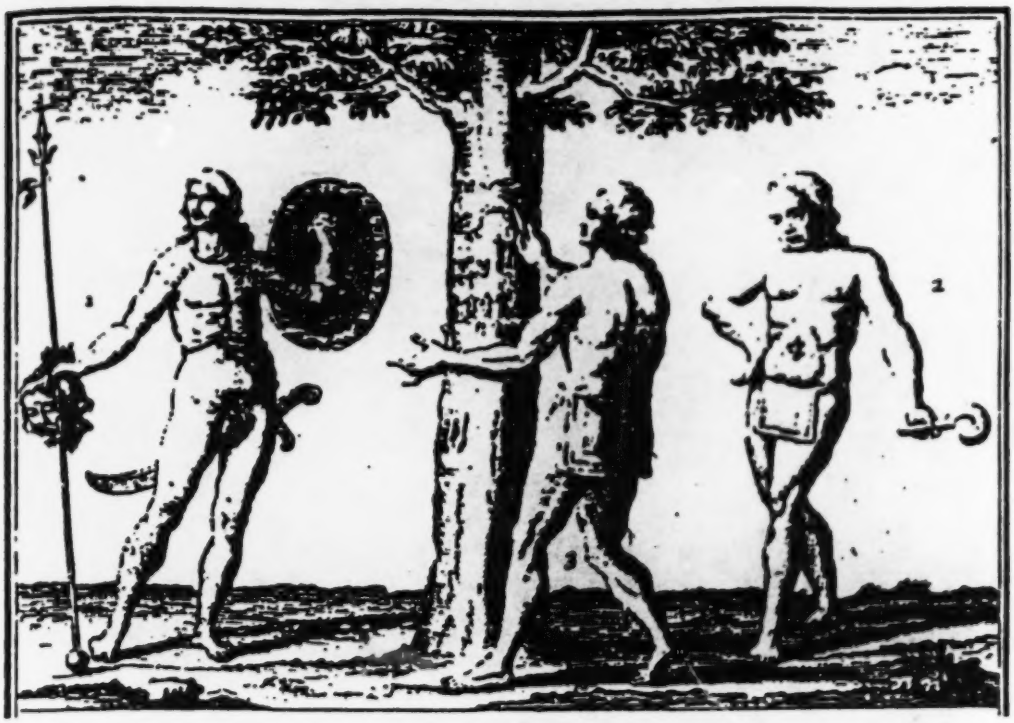

Figure 1.1 Lafitau's Representation of Ideographic Messages Carved Into a Tree by North American Indians. Taken from Lafitau, 1724/1974:43.

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world beyond. Note illustration No. 1.2 and 1.3.

European Adaptations of Aboriginal Literacy

In 1610 Chief Membertou and 140 Micmacs confirmed their spiritual and political alliance with France in a ceremony which included their baptism and a gift of wampum. From that time to the French and English uprising in 1744, French Catholic missionaries lived and worked among Micmacs of eastern Canada, converting them to Catholicism and to a faith which blended well with their own tribal spiritual rituals. Their continued presence among Micmacs also assured the King of France of the Micmacs' continued political and trade alliance. Missionaries learned the native language of the native people, preaching to them about the road to salvation and teaching them ritualistic prayers which were to pave that road. The first missionary to use ideographic symbolization for literary purposes is attributed to Father Christian Le Clerq who in 1677 discovered a new method of teaching Micmacs how to pray. He wrote in his journal:

> Our Lord inspired me with the idea of [characters] the second year of my mission, when being much embarassed as to the method by which I should teach the Micmac Indians to pray to God, I noticed some children were making marks with charcoal upon birchbark, and were counting these with the fingers very accurately at each word of prayers which they pronounced. This made me believe that by giving them some formulary, which would aid their memory by definite characters, I should advance much more quickly than by teaching them through the method of making them repeat a number of times that which I said to them (Ganong, 1910, 131).

Le Clerq reported being very surprised with Micmac facility with the system. He wrote that Micmacs have

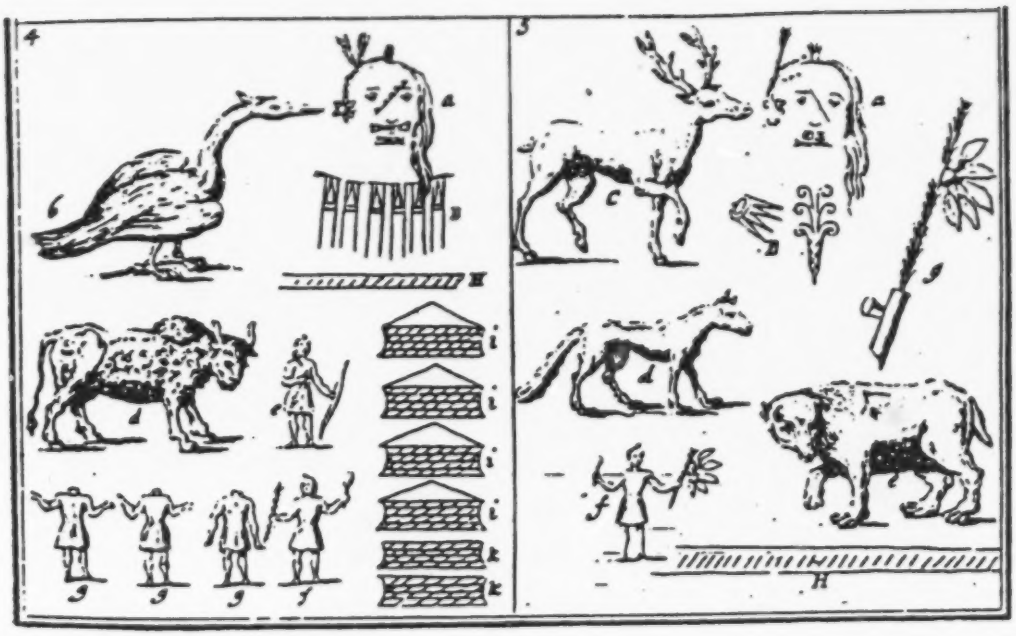

Figure 1.2 Lafitau's representation of ideographic writing. In the box to the left, the inscription reads as follows: An Indian named Two Feathers, a & b, of the tribe of the Heron, c., of the family of the bison, d., accompanied by fifteen warriors, h.(e), has taken a prisoner, f. and carried off three scalps, g., at the sixth trip which he took to go to war, k. (h) and at the forth where he commanded the party, i. The box to the right shows writing that reads as follows: the Indian named Two Arrows, a. of the Tribe of the Deer, b, and of the Wolf Family, c, went on a mission carrying the calamut of peace to the Tribe of the Bear, d, e, accompanied by thirty persons, h. Taken from Lafitau, 1724/1974:43

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> much readiness in understanding this kind of writing that they learn in a single day what they would never have been able to grasp in an entire week without the aid of these leaflets (Ganong, 1910: 126).

Micmac families rapidly diffused this system throughout the nation within the traditional social and cultural contexts. Father taught son, mother taught daughter, and children taught each other. The system involved a design for each word or word phrase and was recorded with charcoal on birchbark leaflets which each family preserved in birchbark boxes bedecked with wampum and porcupine quills (Speck, 1914, 1922, and 1927). Although Le Clerq reported success in using the characters for the remaining ten years of his mission, little remains recorded of his characters. Ganong (1910) concluded, however, in his search for the origin of the characters that Le Clerq used all the aboriginal designs he found, most having the typical double scroll patterns, characteristic of the Wabanaki tribes of the northeast, and developed new character designs for the new words of prayers.

Literacy Transformations from Hieroglyphic to Roman Scripts

In 1735 Father Pierre Antoine Maillard began a 27 year mission among Micmacs of Cape Breton Island during which he expanded hieroglyphic literacy and contributed to the transformation of ideographic literacy to roman script. In the second year of his mission, Maillard reported having discovered an innovative method of using hieroglyphics to teach Micmacs how to pray (Maillard, 1863:355). Subsequent scholars investigating the origin of Maillard's hieroglyphics have concluded that Maillard was the beneficiary of Le Clerq's work, although the new prayers,

chants, and instructions which he composed had to have required almost all new characters (Ganong, 1910; Shea, 1861; Hewson, 1977).

Unlike Le Clerq who frequently characterized Micmacs as savages and barbarians incapable of advancing to letter literacy, Maillard who lived and traveled among Micmacs perceived them as curious and intelligent people, capable of learning anything they wanted to learn. He was frequently challenged by their inquiring minds. He astutely realized that if Micmacs had learned the manner of writing of the French, they would have access to sensitive political and religious literature. Maillard, a political activist in the French and English war, feared that if Micmacs knew how to read and write letters, they would be better able to incite each other through their correspondence to the detriment of French Catholic interests. Thus despite the fact that Maillard had developed a roman script for the Micmac language, which he used for his own language and grammar improvement, he chose to teach them only the hieroglyphics. He thus closing literacy to Micmacs with his prepared hieroglyphic literature of prayers, chants and instructions and then appointed catechists among the tribal hierarchy and elders whose duty it was

> to see to the religious instruction of children, preside at public prayers on Sundays, administer baptism, receive matrimonial promises, and officiate at funerals (Johnston, 1960: 72).

At the close of the French and English war in 1749, the English banned French missionaries from Nova Scotia. For over a

hundred years, Micmacs were without resident Catholic priests. However, they sustained their spiritual rituals and traditions through the catechists and hieroglyphic literature developed by Maillard. Their continued insistence in having a Catholic priest and the English fear of reprisal in their settlements eventually convinced the English to allow them to have a Catholic priest, thus restoring Catholicism to the eastern province.

Micmac ingenuity prevailed, however, and soon Micmacs acquainted themselves with yet another mode of communicating with one another: roman scripts. Despite Maillard's and earlier missionaries' attempts to restrict Micmacs to hieroglyphic literacy, Micmacs had many opportunities to witness new functions and uses of the new system. From as early as Le Clerq's mission in 1675, Le Clerq reported using the natives as couriers of letters to other priests (Ganong, 1910). Similarly, Maillard reported using Micmacs to deliver his letters to military officials. In another context, Maillard prepared transcriptions for the tribal government in his role as interpreter for the English. Aiding in the pacification of Micmacs after the war, he transcribed the Treaty of 1752 into his Micmac roman script. Maillard sought their approval of the peace plan. As a trusted friend of the Micmac Santeoi Maiaumi, the Grand Council, Maillard presided at the ceremony and read the treaty to the assembled Indians. Through these exchanges, Micmacs discovered the political significance of expanding their literacy repetoire. Furthermore, they were reportedly very impressed with the new mode of writing that enabled them to record exactly the words and thoughts of the writer (Maillard, 1863). Yet, Maillard refused to

teach them roman script writing and further forbade Micmacs from going to local English public schools (Koren, 1962).

Yet, the English government sought literacy and education for Micmacs as the sword of assimilation. In 1842 the Nova Scotian government passed an act which provided for free tuition for Micmacs attending their schools, however, Micmacs were not interested in learning English literacy skills. Government reports beginning in 1843 indicate Micmacs' growing interest in learning to read, although they were strongly adamant to transmit only their own culture through literacy in Micmac. Their frequent migrating habits further prevented them from spending much time at it in school (Canada, D.I.A., 1843), thus literacy was taught at home by parents.

Reverend Silas Tertius Rand

By the time Reverend Silas Tertius Rand arrived among Micmacs in 1845, Micmacs had already learned the fundamentals of how to read and write Micmac in the French roman script. In 1850 Rand reported Micmacs were in the constant habit of writing to one another in a script resembling English but sounding like French. Their only preserved literature was written in hieroglyphic characters (Rand, 1950:42).

Rand, a master of a dozen languages, believed in the power of reason achieved through literacy and Bible reading. He frequently criticized the French priests who in seeking to prevent Micmacs from learning how to read and write letters forbade them from going to school (Koren, 1962). He wrote:

> Had their language been reduced to writing in the ordinary way, the Indians would have learned the use of writing and reading, and would have advanced in knowledge so as to be able to cope with their more enlightened invaders; and it would have been more difficult matter for the latter to cheat them out of their lands and other rightful possessions (Rand, 1894:226).

Rand's goals thus were to teach all Micmacs how to read and write in a new script of his devising and to develop literature for them to read. Finding no Micmacs willing to work with a Protestant minister, he relied upon a Frenchman Joe Ruisseaux who had lived among Micmacs most of his life thus was fluent in Micmac, as well as English and French. Rand's new Micmac roman script was based on English script and phonemes, using several diacritics to represent the unique Micmac sounds.

Hoping to show Micmacs the contradictions in Catholic dogma, he translated several sections from the bible into Micmac, developed a Micmac dictionary, and a Micmac reading book. However, despite the courtesy Micmacs extended to Rand, neither Rand nor the Canadian government were able to dissuade Micmacs from their traditional habits and Catholic beliefs. Repeated governmental attempts to introduce Protestantism, bible reading, and formal schooling into Micmac tribal society failed. But despite their refusal to accept the Protestant literature, Micmac literacy skills continued to grow through Rand's influence. Rand reported being pleased with the scores of Micmacs who had learned to read (Rand, 1873).

Father Pacifique Buisson

The appearance in 1894 of Father Pacifique Buisson, more well known as Father Pacifique, revived among Micmacs the religious rituals and traditions earlier established by Father Maillard. These religious rituals fostered the continued development of literacy using the hieroglyphic literature of Father Maillard and promoted the growth of letter literacy using Pacifique's new Catholic literature.

Pacifique studied the various available Micmac publications and manuscripts, such as those of Maillard, and Rand before preparing his own script. Finding Maillard's script deficient in some respects, he modified it, adding capitals and punctuation and simplified the script to 13 letters. Then he prepared a reading literature for it. Some contemporary commentators have maintained that Pacifique was responsible for spreading phonetic literacy among Micmacs (Gray, 1976:47); however, Pacifique acknowledged that phonetic literacy was commonplace among Micmacs prior to his mission. He wrote:

> They almost all know how to read and write in their own fashion. They teach each other from father to son long before they had schools (Pacifique, 1907:39).

As mission priest for the annual Chapel Island mission, a tradition Maillard adapted to Catholic rituals, Father Pacifique noted the reverence and commitment of Micmacs to Maillard's literature and reinforced the already existing literacy traditions. In 1913, he published a catechism in his own modified script. In 1920 he had reprinted the hieroglyphic prayers that had been printed in Vienna through the efforts of Father Kauder in

1866. The successes of the Christian literature among Micmacs suggested the need among missionaries for learning Micmac language and grammar, thus in 1939 Father Pacifique had a Micmac grammar book published. The manner in which the script became diffused was directly through families as it had been in the past. In some communities, religious orders introduced Micmac literacy in the band schools, teaching them the fundamentals of the Catholic doctrines (Bock, 1966:36).

Micmac literacy was thus at its height in 1920 when Canadian governmental policy instituted English language in all Indian day schools and compulsory schooling for all Indian children from the ages of 6 to 16 years. Both the Nova Scotia government and the federal government had found that their efforts from 1800 to 1920 to attract Micmacs to the white man habits and domesticated farming had been repeatedly rejected for traditional migrating and hunting pursuits. Through the Indian Act of 1920, the Parliament of Canada expanded its control over Indian lands and people, by legislating regulatory provisions for administering Indian affairs. The administration of all schools for Indians was assumed by the Department of Indian Affairs, although the schools continued to be staffed by religious orders. In 1930 the opening of a boarding school and the increased age for compulsory schooling to 18 years brought about the gradual decline in Micmac literacy. The disruption of family socialization, along with the loss of traditional land bases with the government's centralization policy, signaled the near demise of the Micmac literacy until the 70's.

Contemporary Reconstruction of Micmac Literacy

In 1969 the federal government proposed a final plan of asssimilation and termination of Indian tribes and their responsibility. The proposal, which came to be known among Indians as the White Paper, was overwhelmingly rejected by Indian people throughout Canada. An alternate proposal proposed by Indian leaders insisted upon the government developing a more positive and central role of language and culture in federal Indian programs. The federal government responded by withholding the White Paper and entered into consultations with Indian bands and other tribal leaders. Native Cultural Centres were funded to support the development of culturally-responsive educational materials. Eleven Micmac Cultural Centres were thus funded, each having its own priorities, needs and resources, but all interested in preserving some aspects of the Micmac language and culture.

Research in the Micmac language occupied many of the cultural centers' initial efforts to find, collect, and adapt available materials to classroom learning. The existence of several writing systems, each considered linguistically deficient, led to community debates among Micmac centres and among language specialists as to the best writing script in which to prepare culturally responsive educational materials. The major issue was whether it was better to promote literacy in what was considered by some to the traditional orthography of Father Pacifique despite its limitations or to develop a fundamentally new writing script founded on current knowledge of linguistic principles.

In 1974 the Micmac Association of Cultural Studies, serving

the Nova Scotia Micmac communities, developed their own script with the help of native and nonnative linguists. The system was initially met with resistance. Many elders feared the loss of the literacy traditions established by Pacifique, and thus the loss of important cultural and spiritual traditions. When the Micmac Association of Cultural Studies finally brought the script to the Grand Council, explaining the merits of their system and seeking their acceptance, some Micmac communities adopted the script for their center.

In some Micmac communities where loyalty to Pacifique script was strong, modifications to the Pacifique script were required. Mildred Millea, an energetic mother of eleven children and fluent native speaker, began her linguistic and educational work without materials, except a language master machine and the prayer book from which her mother taught her to read. Without formal linguistic training , she launched a new modified Pacifique script and prepared Micmac language materials for the classroom. With as many conflicting views as there were linguists working on Micmac writing, Millea resolved to continue modifications of the Pacifique orthography until the issues were resolved (Millea, 1981). Millea's work and her popularity as a teacher became well known among Micmac communities in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. She was frequently recruited to conduct workshops and courses to teach others her new modified script.

In other Micmac communities, such as Newfoundland and Quebec, more modifications of existing scripts prevailed. However, with most of the communities' efforts put into teaching new script

usages, little progress was being made in materials development. By the beginning of the 80's, four different roman scripts existed, each having its proponents and some introductory literature devised for it. But because each program had its script preference and had operated independently, duplication of efforts and lack of resource sharing yeilded a general lack of sequential literacy materials among all groups and a lack of concensus over which script to use for educational purposes. Meanwhile through 1979, high dropout rates and recividism were continued to characterize Indian education (UNSI, 1979).

Conclusion

This study found that although the nature of the forms of literacy have been intrinsically different, the functions of writing have remained strikingly similar over time. Literacy has served the spiritual, cultural and social needs of Micmacs, being maintained by tribal families for spiritual, secular public, and personal needs of the people. Informal, supportive, but rigorous instructional contexts have characterized Micmac literacy. However, since colonial contact with Europeans, Micmac literacy has been manipulated for governmental and missionary interests, often to the detriment of the language and culture of the Micmacs.

Coercive methods of cultural assimilation through education and literacy must now be replaced with a Micmac education of cultural transmission and development of cultural adaptive strategies founded upon a choice of systems and knowledge. Bilingual bicultural education must be the foundation upon which

different knowledge bases and cultural processes are met with respect and chosen. Early algonkian literacy processes have demonstrated that any system can work as long as the people value it and have use for it. The aboriginal forms of literacy served a function for algonkian society: universal symbols represented concepts and ideas, not sounds of language, and its legitimacy for contemporary tribal society has not been replaced. Rather missionaries and governmental education has attempted to assimilate Micmacs to the functions of European literacy not cultural transmission and adaption. A contemporary assessment of Micmac education suggests the need for the continued development of traditional and contemporary functions of literacy and knowledge, as well as its systems.

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